

Ancient origins

Babylonian bas-reliefs and Assyrian wall drawings point to very early swimming skills among humans. The most ancient and famous of drawings depicting men swimming are to be found in the Kebir desert. They are estimated to be about 6,000 years old. The Nagoda bas-relief also has paintings of swimmers that date back some 5,000 years.

Many of the ancient drawings and paintings come from what is now Italy. The oldest date back 2,600 years, belonging to the Etruscans at Tarquinia. An ancient tomb in Greece depicts swimming and diving scenes and dates back 2,500 years.

Written testament to early swimming falls within the past 3,000 years. The Bible, the Iliad, the Odyssey all contain references to swimming. Thucydides noted the activity in scripts that are 2,400 years old. Murals of the Tepantila House at Teotihuacan near Mexico City show men taking the plunge into the waters of Tlalocan, the heavenly pool of Tlaloc, god of water.

Many of the world's ancient civilisations swam, including the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, Persians, Romans and Greeks. Bathing was a tradition in the Byzantine Empire, with Constantinople at the helm, and among the Romans Julius Caesar was famous for his swimming abilities, once wading successfully from a stricken ship to the safety of shore for some 300m clutching important documents that had to be kept dry.

A small legion of other generals, leaders and royalty, including Charlemagne and Louis XI, also swam and advocated the activity for its health, physical and psychological benefits.

Swimming was not part of the Ancient Olympic Games but Greeks were keen swimmers and held the activity in high regard. One of the most cutting insults one Greek could level at another in ancient times was that his rival was a man “who neither knew how to run nor swim”. Plato once declared that anyone who could not swim lacked a proper education.

In terms of competitions, the Europeans claim to have hosted the earliest of organised competitions, in England in the 1790s, but this pales by comparison to evidence from Japan that suggests races were held 2,000 years ago. The tradition was rarely lost: in 1603 the Emperor Go-Yoozei decreed that all schoolchildren should not only learn to swim but that they should participate in inter-school racing.

Available records prove that regular school competition did indeed take place as early as 1810.

By that time, native inhabitants of the Americas, West Africa and the South Sea Islands of the Pacific used a type of crawl for generations before the stroke was used in sport, while breaststroke and sidestroke, more commonly used in Europe, were adaptations of doggy paddle, a way of staying afloat that replicates the basic instinct of humans when thrown into water. Doggy paddle is depicted in drawings from early Middle Eastern civilisations and in mosaics found in petrified Pompeii.

In Britain, the Roman tradition of bathing may have been diminished during the times of the Celts, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, and Normans, but all those histories have an abundance of swimming references. The clock was turned back in the reign of Queen Anne, when in 1615 she declared that a second visit to the Bath Spa had improved her constitution. Bath lost out to what would become Brighton in the 1780s, when the then Prince of Wales introduced dad, King George III, to the pleasures of bathing in salt water at sea. By 1820 the activity was hugely popular among the English well-to-do and foreign visitors, with doctors exalting swimming, sea air and salt as tonics for body and soul. It was at the same time that attention turned from bathing and leisure to sport and racing.
